Navigating the Challenges in Language and Literary Studies Pedagogy amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic which broke out towards the close of 2019 affected the societal behavioural attitude and lifestyle of the humanity in so many ways. Schools had to be closed and vital sectors of public and private lives were critically affected due to the total lock down measure enforced in many countries. The unprecedented global event obviated alternative approaches to pedagogy. Many institutions resorted to online teaching and learning platforms such as Zoom, Learning Management System (LMS), Whatshapp, radio and television broadcasts, and so on. This paper examined the physical and emotional dislocations caused by the emergency innovations deployed into teaching and learning. For an effective and thorough analysis, both the primary and secondary data for this research were collected through questionnaire system and online sources such as (from selected) National Newspapers, transcripts of TV News broadcasts. Data for the study are analysed using Fishman's (1968) Sociology of Language and Hymes' (1962) Ethnography of Communication. Finding from the study showed that the emergency measures taken to manage teaching and learning during the lockdown hardly impacted effective pedagogy. The study is expected to equip sociolinguists and scholars of language and communication with necessary tools to adequately process and surmount the challenges posed by this global event, particularly in the absence of face-to-face interaction as it affects the teaching and learning of language and literary studies.

Keywords: Navigating, Language, COVID-19, sociolinguistics, society, and social distancing.

Introduction

Coronavirus disease also known as COVID-19, caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome; coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) was first discovered in December, 2019 at the wet market in Wuhan, China. It was declared a pandemic by the Director-General of World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom

Ghebreyesus on 11th March, 2020.[1] The outbreak of the pandemic gave birth to what is now popularly referred to as the 'New Normal'. This is because social interaction and interpersonal communication assumed a new dimension such as lockdown and social distancing measures melted on people, thereby seeking new ways of communicating with one another. The teaching and learning of language and literary studies like other areas of human endeavors also assumed a new dimension. The use of social media and other computer mediated applications for pedagogical purpose became a new trend amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic. Teachers, learners and even parents had to adapt to the new reality. This brings us to the Ethnography of communication which according to Chaim Noy (2017)[2] "addresses the elements that comprise communication as practice, means, and media of communication, participants and participation structure, and communication environments and context."

To this end, this study is interested in ascertaining the likelihood or possibility that these trends have become part of our existence? Then, we are curious about whether we are not going to jettison the 'New Normal' once the pandemic is over. It is also necessary to know for sure if the pandemic has provided us (the society) with new and better ways of communicating. The study equally investigated the likely draw-backs effects in terms of effective communication, teaching and learning of language and literary studies amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Language and Social Interaction

Relationship between changes in society and changes in language cannot be overemphasized. It is also germane in the literary studies. Ashley(2019)[3] attests to this thus: "Language is central to social interaction in every society, regardless of location and time. Language and social interaction have a reciprocal relationship: language shapes social interactions and social interactions shape language". It is on this basis that the Sociology of Language, the interdisciplinary enterprise established and developed by (Fisherman,1968)[4] has evolved into what we might call today, (for its integrative and yet distinctive character) – *Fisherman Sociolinguistics.*[5] .Fisherman sociolinguistics subsumes the following categories of study:

- Language and behaviour;
- Multilingualism;
- Language maintenance/language shift/reversing language shift;
- Language spread;
- Language attitudes and language ethnicity/nationality/identity/religion/power;

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[1] WHO Director-General's Opening Remark at the Media Briefing on COVID-19 [11th March, 2020] *www.who.int*

[2] Noy, C. (2017), Ethnography of Communication, retrieved from www.researchgate.com. 2nd of
October, 2021.

[3] Ashley, C. (2019), Sociological Definition of Popular Culture: The History of the Genesis of Pop Culture: https://thought.co.com/popular-culture-definition-3026453

[4] Fishman, J. (1968), Reading in the Sociology of Language, The Hague: Mouton.

[5] Ofelia et al, p.6

- Language planning and language policy and
- Bilingual education and minority language group education.

For the purpose of this paper, the analysis was hinged on two aspects of the above categories which include;

1. Language and behaviour as it relates to social behaviour as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic.
2. Language maintenance and language shift amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

Jimoh Amzat et al, (2020)[6] observe that sociologically, the pandemic has caused global social dislocations by limiting and inhibiting global social relations. The idea of "social distancing" negates regular social interaction, which is the bedrock of human society (Amzat & Razum, 2014)[7]. A contagious disease of global health importance also disrupts the usual norms of close physical contacts since the disease is transmitted through contact with individuals who already contracted the disease. COVID-19 deglobalizes the world in terms of human migration with airports shut, [schools] and social events (sports, festivals and the like) postponed indefinitely. The "stay-at-home" campaign and proscription of (large) social gatherings mean that social interactions were virtually limited. This therefore means that people have to turn to "none face-to-face" means of interaction since they are left with no other choice due to the imposed restrictions of movement and physical contacts. The internet became a rallying points for educational institutions, businesses, governments, 'socio-prenuers' etc. in a bid to relate their target audience. Educational institutions like Kings University, an institution that prides itself as an ICT driven institution deployed Learning Management System (LMS) to continue both teaching and learning for the lecturers and students who due to the lockdown are miles apart. In his publication, Readings in Sociology of Language (1968)[8] Fisherman opines; "Since language normally function in a social matrix and since societies depend heavily on language as a medium (if not as a symbol) of interaction, it is certainly appropriate to expect that their observable manifestations, language behaviour and social behaviour will be appreciably related in many lawful ways'' (Fisherman, 1968:6)[9].

Undoubtedly. COVID-19 Pandemic disrupts the social matrix, "Humans and their behaviour exist in a social context. Without a nervous system there is no human behavoiur, and there is none without society either. It has been said that an isolated chimpanzee is not a real chimpanzee, and the same can be said of human beings." Bunge M., Ardila R. (1987)[10]. Therefore, the use of language through the instrumentality of the internet became the convenient and conciliatory tool that patches the fabric of society together at that tenuous moment in history.

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[6] Amzat, J. and Akor, O. (2020) "Nigerian: COVID-19 -0ur Self-Isolation Policy has failed – FG" Abuja: Daily Drust, May 8.
[7] Amzat, J. and Razum, O. (2014) Medical Sociology in Africa. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publisher.
[8] Fishman, J. (1968), Reading in the Sociology of Language, The Hague: Mouton.
[9] Fishman, J. (1968), Reading in the Sociology of Language, The Hague: Mouton.
[10] Bunge, M. Ardila R. (1987) The Social Matrix of Behaviour – Philosophy of Psychology. New York, NY: Springer

Navigating the Covid-19 Pandemic Challenges Using the Experience of the Languages and Literary Studies, Kings University as a Case Study

The index case of this deadly disease was reported in Lagos, Nigeria on the 27th February, 2020. After the index case was reported, the Government of Nigeria, through the Federal Ministry of Health led by the Hon. Minister of Health, Dr. Osagie Ehanire put measures in place to ensure the outbreak in Nigeria is controlled and contained quickly. The multi-sectorial Coronavirus Preparedness Group led by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) immediately swung into action by activating a National Emergency Operations Centre. On March 9, 2020, President Muhammadu Buhari established The Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, to oversee Nigeria's multi-sectoral inter-governmental efforts to contain the spread of and mitigate the impact of the virus in Nigeria. One of the objectives of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) is to review and make approval recommendations for implementation country-wide or regional non-pharmaceutical interventions if and when needed; such as school closures, suspension of large gatherings, implementation of social distancing, flight limitation etc.

Towards the end of March 2020, following the Federal Government directives, the Kings University, Odeomu, Osun State abruptly suspended teaching and learning. All staff and students were asked to vacate the school premises. This was done to guarantee the safety of everyone despite the measures already put in place. The remaining part of the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic session continued online with sundry challenges and hiccups. The school set up the Kings University Learning Management System (LMS)[11] It was a well thought out and timely initiative, as it enabled students to continue their studies and also take their exams online. By so doing, even in the midst of the pandemic, Kings University students did not experience any form of academic disruption.
The department of Languages and Linguistics which falls under the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences was not left out in the use of a combination of the Learning Management System (LMS) and other social media platforms like Whatsapp, Facebook, etc. to continue teaching its students all the courses slated for the semester. Although, these platforms could only afford both learners and tutors limited results, the residual knowledge got earlier before the lockdown and school closure were of complementary advantages. Thus, total dependence on the 'New Classroom' was practically not possible as it brought to the fore unprecedented challenges some of which include;

1. Limited knowledge on the effective application of these platforms for teaching and learning by both lecturers and students.
2. Poor internet connectivity
3. High cost of data
4. Poor comprehension due to the non-personal nature of the new method
5. Examination integrity cannot be ascertained.

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[11] http://lms.kingsuniversity.edu.ng.

Limited Knowledge: the use of social media for social interaction is inherently challenging but much more uphill task when contemplated and deployed as medium for teaching and learning especially when the lecturers and students are hitherto mostly familiar with the face-to-face method. The ICT bureau had to conduct crash training sessions for lecturers. The lecturers indeed struggled to use the media presented through convoluted methodologies. Lecture Notes were uploaded by lecturers and downloaded by students devoid of the usual classroom interaction which teaching and learning aids. The use of Voice Notes (VN) on Whatsapp was the closest to a face-to-face interaction yet not everybody was conversant with how it is used or even actually used it. For courses like Phonology, where the production and articulation of sound is paramount, lecturers and students had to grapple with the assumptions. PDF Lecture Slides were not immediately accessible to students without the right apps on their devices.

Poor Internet Connectivity: Internet connectivity in Nigeria is still at its lowest level. According to Olafusi (2020)[12] "While many Nigerians enjoy download speeds of up to 11.70Mbps or slower (enough to few devices in your home at once), more than 60% Nigerians are still not connected to broadband. This proves that less than half the numbers of people in the country are able to access the internet. It highlights that only 85.49 million Nigerians have internet access, some 42 percent of the total population." While this gap is yet to be bridged, many students are simply cut off from online learning platforms. There are a lot of students in the rural areas who would not be able to access the internet.

High Cost of Data: One gigabyte for mobile internet in Nigeria cost on average 88 U.S. cents as of February 2021. The country ranked 43rd in a list of 230 countries worldwide, from the cheapest to the most expensive for mobile data. In the regional comparison, Nigeria was among the nations with lower costs for mobile data in Africa. Out of 60 plans analyzed in the country, the lowest price observed was 0.03 U.S. dollars per 1GB for a 30 days plan. In the most expensive plan, 1GB cost 5.25 U.S.dollars (Varrella, 2021).[13] Although it is generally believed that Nigeria has one of the lowest data rate worldwide, other economic factors like unemployment, high exchange rate etc. have made the cost of data to be very high for majority of Nigerians. Students from low income backgrounds cannot afford the amount of data required for classes on Zoom or to download large files.

Poor Comprehension: In the process of research for this paper, a poll amongst students and lectures of Kings University, Odeomu was conducted. It was discovered that 95% of the students who responded to the questionnaires preferred the physical classes to the virtual classes because according to them, they have better understanding of concepts in the physical class than in the

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[12] Olafusi, O. (2020), Slow Internet Digital Divide Nigeria. Retrieved fromwww.linkedin.com2nd
of October, 2021.
[13] Varrella , S. (2021), Price for Mobile Data in Nigeria, retrieved fromwww.statista.com30th,
October, 2021.

virtual class. For example, a 300L student of the Department of Micro Biology says he prefers the physical class because he could respond to problems or situations in real time and he could also express himself. A lecturer in the Accounting Department discloses that he prefers the physical class because it enables him have physical interaction with his students. In the event of another lockdown, he advises lecturers to incorporate the video aspect for online teaching, asserting that this will be the closest to a physical classroom.

Examination Integrity: Any examination process devoid of diligent supervision has the tendency of being compromised. Students who took lectures online and for most of the identified problems associated with online classes had problem comprehending the lectures invariably resort to examination malpractice most especially because they were taking the exams in the comfort of their homes far away from their supervisors or lecturer. This has the tendency to reduce further the quality or integrity of the examination and the graduate produced through the online system.

Issues in the Questionnaire Administered on Lecturers at Kings University

1. Is physical classroom more effective in reaching the core objectives of teaching your students?
2. Do you subscribe to the opinion that virtual classroom will gradually replace physical classroom?
3. During the COVID-19 lockdown, online platforms were the only convenient platform for you to deliver your lectures to your students, how convenient was it really?
4. How true is it that there is no topic that cannot be effectively taught online?
5. Do you support the notion that online platform have a negative impact on physical social interaction necessary for effective learning and teaching?

Issues in the Questionnaire Administered on Students at Kings University

1. Is virtual classroom much better than physical class?
2. Did you miss any online class due to network failure?
3. Do you consider that your semester's result was better because you took the exams online in the comfort of your home?
4. Does physical interaction or face-to-face engagement aid your understanding of concepts being taught?

Table 1:
Table showing the responses to the questions posed to the lecturers.

S/N	Responses			Percentage of Responses			Total	%
	Positive	Negative	No. of Responses	Positive%	Negative %	No. of Responses %	10	100
1	9	1	-	90	10	-	10	100

2	3	7	-	30	70	-	10	100
3	10	-	-	100	-	-	10	100
4	1	9	-	10	90	-	10	100
5	8	2	-	80	20	-	10	100

Source: Author

Table 2:
Table showing the responses to questions posed to the students.

	Responses			Percentage of Responses			Total	%
S/N	Positive	Negative	No. of Responses	Positive %	Negative %	No. of Responses %	10	100
1	2	8	-	80	20	-	10	100
2	5	5	-	50	50	-	10	100
3	-	10	-	-	100	-	10	100
4	10	0	-	100	-	-	10	100

Source: Author

Interpretation of the Analysis/Table

In the questionnaire, there are twelve items serving as a medium through which the randomly selected respondents (lecturers and students gave their opinion on the Fisherman's sociolinguistics concept of language and behaviour as it relates to teaching and learning language and literary studies. Their opinions will help the researcher to know the effect of online teaching and learning during the lockdown. For lecturers, item one in the questionnaire seeks to know if truly physical classroom is more effective in reaching the core objectives of teaching students. Nine of the respondents constituting 90% agree to this term while one of the respondents constituting 1% has a contrary opinion. Only 30% of the respondents believe that virtual classroom will gradually replace physical classroom in item number two. Item number three reveals that 100% the respondents agreed that online platforms were the only platforms convenient and available for them to reach their students. Item number 4 reveals that only 1% of the respondents agree that there is no topic that cannot be effectively taught online, 90% of respondents disagree with this item. Item number five reveals that 80% of the responded agree that online platform have a negative impact on physical social interaction necessary for effective learning.

For students, item number one in the questionnaire seek to know if virtual classroom is better than physical class. Eight of the respondents representing 80% of the respondents disagree with this item. Only two respondents agree

with this item representing 20% of the respondents. In item two seek to know if the students missed any lecture due to network failure. Five of the respondents representing 50% of the responded claimed they missed lecture due to network failure. Item number three seek to know if the students performed better in the exams taken online. All of the respondents representing 100% responded in the negative. In item number four, 80% of the respondents agreed that physical interaction aid their understanding of concept being taught. Only 20% responded in the negative. Item number five seek to know how easy it is to engage in exams malpractice during online exams. Nine of the respondents representing 90% agreed that it is easy for students to engage in exam malpractice during online exams. Only 20% responded in the negative.

From the fore-going, the questionnaire has revalidated the relationship between language learning and social interaction. Hymes(1962, 1964) asserts:

> …that the study of language must concern itself with describing and analyzing the ability of the native speakers to use language for communication in real situations (communicative competence) rather than limiting itself to describing the potential ability of the ideal speaker/listener to produce grammatically correct sentences (linguistic competence). Speakers of a language in particular communities are able to communicate with each other in a manner which is not only correct but also appropriate to the sociocultural context. This ability involves a shared knowledge of the linguistic code as well as of the socio-cultural rules, norms and values which guide the conduct and interpretation of speech and other channels of communication in a community …[14]

This paper has reinforced the fact that COVID-19 Pandemic negatively impacted language and social behaviour especially as it affect the teaching and learning of language and literary studies.

Conclusion

COVID-19 caused an unprecedented disruption in the virtually every sphere of life world-over. The teaching of English Language and Literary Studies was not left behind. Lockdown measures imposed by many countries gave birth to new trends and methods of communicating ideas, buy and selling, teaching and learning, etc. Language and social interactions took on a new dimension, it moved from physical interaction to virtual interaction. Although it has a number of considerable advantages, it nonetheless exposed the shortcomings and challenges that confronted many institutions while the period of emergency

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[14] Hymes, D. (1962), The Ethnography of Speaking. Pp.13-53 in Gladwin, T. and Sturteviant, W.
C. (eds), Washington: Anthropology society of Washington.; Hymes, D. (1962), The Ethnography of Speaking. Pp.13-53 in Gladwin, T. and Sturteviant, W.
C. (eds), Washington: Anthropology society of Washington

lasted. Going forward, it is imperative that governments and other institutions (especially educational institutions) take proactive measures in the event of another lockdown by preparing ahead of eventualities. The teaching and learning of English Language and Literary Studies can be enhanced through online platforms if the necessary infrastructures are put in place. The world has become a global village; the use of technology can enhance our productivity in every sphere of human endeavor if properly deployed.

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